

VIETNAM POLICY: THE SEARCH FOR DOMINANCE

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1. The present situation in Vietnam is uncertain. On the one hand, the emergence of Thieu as an effective political leader, the continuous favorable military trend, the increasing numbers of Chieu Hoi, the recent HES results, the growing effectiveness of the RVNAF and the GVN, the casualties and war weariness of the enemy, the increasing reliance by the enemy on PAVN units and personnel all argue that things are going well. Taken at face value these factors support the notion that we are winning, literally winning, unless we throw things away in the negotiations. But there are negative factors at work as well: the frighteningly high ARVN desertion rate, the continuous effectiveness of the VC in the villages -- low-scale military and terrorist activity coupled with political organization, the depth and solidity of enemy organization, the continuous availability of sanctuary, the possibility of political deterioration of the GVN particularly as negotiations proceed, the continual reliance in SVN on in-group leadership rather than on a broadly based national government, friendly war-weariness. On balance, I would give slightly greater weight to the favorable factors -- but attach only a reasonable probability to that judgment.

2. Present U.S. policy lacks domestic support and provides perverse incentives to both the GVN and the enemy.

a. The present cost of the war in dollars and in blood is higher than Congress or the U.S. public will support. A more acceptable rationale for the war might have helped earlier, but it is too late now to generate support for the present level of U.S. effort.

A reduction in the cost of the war will, however, reopen the door to funding an acceptable rationale for a continuing U.S. effort.

b. Given the chance of a collapse of U.S. domestic support for the war, the enemy has a strong incentive to keep it going and take everything. Clifford, McGovern, Young have all shown how strong the political pressure is going to be to phase out the U.S. effort.

c. The GVN reads the tea leaves just the other way: Nixon's election confirms the durability of U.S. support. The GVN realizes it has to continue to be at least nominally effective, but sees no urgent need for military or political reform. They aren't scared enough yet that the U.S. will pick up its marbles and go home.

d. Paradoxically, present U.S. policy weakens the GVN politically: the knowledge that U.S. soldiers are slaughtering Vietnamese causes anger and shame among important elements of the SVN population and gives the enemy a powerful political weapon.

3. Irreversibility is a problem for the enemy as well as for us. It's
hard for us to resume bombing after a pause or put back troops once we've taken them out. But the enemy has the same problem: technically and politically it will be difficult for NVN to reintroduce PAVN forces once they are pulled out, or to resume random rocketing of cities, or, more generally, to rekindle village support and enthusiasm after a tactical withdrawal of military forces.

4. An appropriate U.S. policy today should include a significant staged unilateral reduction in U.S. forces, limitation of negotiations to mutual withdrawal of forces, revision of the rules of engagement for U.S. forces in Vietnam, and a reduction in the size and visibility of U.S. involvement in pacification.

- a. An initial significant unilateral reduction in the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam would lay the basis for the re-establishment of domestic political support for continuous U.S. support of the GVN, reduce enemy belief in the inevitability of the collapse of U.S. political support for Vietnam involvement, and show the GVN we mean it when we say the burden is going to be shifted more to them. How large, how soon, and what kind of initial force reduction is hard to say without greater technical competence than I possess but the principles should be: large enough to have a significant political impact here and in SVN, as much fat as possible given its size, as soon as possible and announced by the end of January. What about 100,000 men by June 30?
- b. Further troop reductions should be programmed to be carried out in the absence of any NVN escalation and the GVN but not NVN should be told they are coming. The full mutual withdrawal of forces (from Laos and Cambodia as well as SVN) should be the negotiating issue for us. No unilateral troop reductions should be made below the level necessary to sustain (not win) the war, but we should be prepared to accept mutual withdrawal if the NVN are.

c. U.S. fire power should be used largely in support of troop operations and M&I artillery for the in-country air strikes reduced (except for B-52 raids on enemy troop concentrations). Rules of engagement should be tightened and monitored to reduce civilian casualties. All crop destruction operations should be stopped entirely and defoliation operations held to a tight and monitored minimum. There is abundant evidence that the military pay-off from present use of U.S. firepower is minimal, and equally abundant that the negative political impact is large both here and in SVN.

d. Pacification isn't important enough to justify the presence of so many so visible Americans all over South Vietnam. CORDS should be greatly reduced in size and a return made to an advisory role. The present numbers of Americans don't accomplish much anyway, and what they do accomplish is often not very important. But they are very visible both to reporters and to the South Vietnamese. They are an important factor in the increase in Vietnam about "real" American intents and make good propaganda for the enemy. They also implicate the United States in every aspect of the GVN and make it impossible for the U.S. Congress and public to judge GVN performance by the standards appropriate to a developing nation. There is little need in this memo to add a caveat about protecting essential anti-infrastructure operations. The U.S. Mission in Saigon will throw up every kind of argument even against pruning, whereas cutting is required.

5. The above general lines of policy are dominant. Skilfully carried out they preserve the chances for "winning" but they don't put the new Administration on the same old hook. They would put the monkey where it belongs -- on the GVN. If our optimists are right (and I'm inclined to think they are) the political respite here will give the GVN breathing room to prove them so -- and may be the only way to do so. If the pessimists are right, the GVN will hang -- but hang itself not be hanged by us. And this is the key to the success of the policy: the announced objective must be to provide the support necessary to offset external military support for the enemy but no more. As an important corollary, all announcements regarding U.S. troop reductions should be made by Thieu and associated with increased GVN capability for "self-help." The ultimate goal is the creation of a GVN and RVNAF capable of handling even PAVN -- and this is not a ridiculous goal for the next few years.

6. MAC/V cooperation is essential, but impossible if "attrition" is still seen as the path to "victory." Only with an explicit policy other than military victory as soon as possible can MAC/V be induced to do the necessary planning and staffing involved. As long as military victory as soon as possible is MAC/V's goal, MAC/V won't be able to regear and rethink the problem. Once reduction of U.S. costs is made an equally important objective, and the rationale for it persuasively communicated to MAC/V, the needed can be achieved: U.S. troops protected, RVNAF supported, the enemy punished. In the absence of clear signals there will be chaos.

7. The GVN and Political Evolution

The GVN seems to be more stable than at any time during the last four years. In the interests of replacing or counterbalancing Ky's influence (and perhaps under pressure of the onset of talks) Thieu has broadened his cabinet base to include more Southerners and some respected nationalists -- most notably, Premier Tran Van Huong. And he has backed Huong's drive to replace corrupt officials (with, by and large, Thieu supporters, though most seem to represent improvement). For the first time in years, representative institutions exist, at both national and local levels. These are moves, at last, in the right direction in the political struggle with the Communists.

Yet the coalescence of support for the GVN still mainly involves the more conservative, landowning or merchant groups, and the educated elites formerly close to the French administration. These elements, along with refugees from the North and GVN/ARVN officials with most to protect from Communist takeover, tend to be the most uncompromising anti-Communists. But it is questionable whether their leaders alone have either (a) the ability to mobilize the loyalties and efforts of enough of the non-Communist majority of the nation to confront effectively either the military or political efforts of the Communist apparatus, during or after hostilities, or (b) the will to talk directly with the NLF to seek any form of compromise settlement. In blunt terms: they do not engage either the trust or the self-interest (e.g., aspirations for social mobility or higher income) of the mass even of the non-Communist population; and they do not really want the war to end.

A further evolution of the government makeup and base of support, to include more non-Communist groups with organized rural roots like the various Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects and the Montagnard "nationalists", and those with urban organization like the Buddhist associations, the Chinese and the unions, could serve both these purposes. Both are in U.S. interests. A broader GVN promises more

Vietnamese initiative towards ending the war. And greater cohesion of a broad range of non-Communist elements offers the only hope (a significant hope, if it can be achieved) of reducing the risk or even of postponing or cushioning an eventual Communist takeover if a compromise ends hostilities.

Yet one of the most unsuccessful aspects of our efforts has been getting the GVN to do virtually anything that it did not want to do, and it usually did not want to do anything that would in any serious way affect its own current distribution of power. We have gone to the GVN with small and large shopping lists for change and improvement. We have applied pressure and we have been kind and gentle. No combination of these tactics has proven successful. GVN tactics have been to resist us for a while, then when some pressure is applied, to agree in principle, and then to take little or no action. One explanation for the GVN's unresponsiveness is probably its belief that we would not invoke sanctions against them. If this has been their judgment, it has proven correct. The argument is invariably made, and there is undoubtedly truth to it, that we should not judge them by our standards or expect too much of them. This wise judgment, however, has been used to justify U.S. inaction rather than action with judiciousness.

8. The Domino Theory

Ever since the early 1950s U.S. policy has been based on the domino theory, either tacitly or explicitly. After a great deal of waffling and argumentation, the intelligence community has finally come to the judgment that the domino theory has very little validity under current circumstances, and that even with an adverse outcome in Vietnam the fate of Southeast Asia will be determined much more by what the countries of this region themselves do in their own behalf than on a communist threat per se. NIE 1-68 of 6 June 1968 states the position:

"29. Assuming a negotiation in Vietnam which leaves the Communist apparatus and the non-Communist political forces intact but no longer in active combat, the situation in Vietnam and Laos would probably be indecisive for some time. Subversion in Cambodia and Thailand would continue, but could probably be contained. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia -- in Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines -- governments would confront the continuing and intractable problems of economic development and of nation-building; these would provide issues and situations susceptible of exploitation by forces wishing to unseat or subvert the existing regimes. By and large, the governments would probably get the better of it. Even if Vietnam fell fairly soon into the hands of a regime dominated by the Communists, the other regimes would probably not collapse, but their struggle for existence would become more intense and their survival more precarious. They have assets South Vietnam has never had, namely, relative peace, some sense of nationhood, and real successes against Communist subversion."

NIE 50-68 of 14 November 1968 develops this thesis more fully. Confirming the anti-domino judgment with respect to Vietnam, this NIE argues that it is Laos (once again!) rather than Vietnam which will have a much greater impact on the future of the area.